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The spirituality of hockey

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The Doctors of the Church teach us that to become truly one with Christ we need to control and moderate the desires we have at the core of our being. But “I can do what I want” tends to be our motto.

I know next to nothing about the sport of hockey. For most of my life I had seen no need to embrace this part of North East culture. Being from the West Coast, sunny San Diego, the closest I ever came to hockey was the ice cubes in my Coke as I lay out at the beach.

In San Diego to claim one is a hockey fan is like claiming membership in Al-Qaida. It is the antithesis of what we Californians see as our core values: being laid back and relaxed — not to mention warm.

When I finally gathered the courage to attend a hockey game, the first thing I noticed on opening the doors to the rink was Spina skating at full speed toward a player from the opposing team. And then, right in front of me, with full force, he slammed the dude against the glass like a rag doll. “What in hell’s name are you doing!” rang through my head. Spina recovered quickly, got the puck, left the other guy laid out on the ice and skated away. “I’m gonna have a talk with that boy tomorrow. He has some anger issues he needs to work out.”

As I found my seat, tried to warm up and the game continued I realized this radical, uncontrolled, flagrantly brutal action was just part of the game. It was exciting, fast, and fully physical. It was a blast! It was thrilling to bundle up and see such dedicated athletes compete full force in a game they love.

Last week I attended one of the varsity’s away games. They were sporting new shirts emblazoned with a fleur-de-lis. I was reminded of *Ghost*’s restored chapel ceiling and the fleur-de-lis and stars recently added there. That is when it hit me — the spirituality of hockey — the link between the seemingly rough and violent sport and the lessons of the Doctors of the Church.

Although I am still learning the sport, I do know the physicality of hockey and the drive it invokes in its advocates. There on the ice, wrapped in pads and helmets, swinging large sticks and tossing around a hard plastic puck, are young men striving to win a very physical game. At times players cannot stop



quickly enough to keep from plowing into other players (as Spina had on my first day). Nor is their aim for the puck always sure and they end up smacking an opponent. On occasion you can hear the banter from the ice, enough to curl the hair of a sailor. But that is it! To take offence at every slight, real or supposed, and then to lose control only means you will lose the game.

In all of this there is a consequence — the penalty box. Being there hurts you and it hurts the team. Be temperate in your actions, control those emotions, keep a cool head. No church doctor can be as clear to a young man as a hockey coach and a referee can be.

In any Catholic school, in any family, often there is a tension between academics, athletics, and spirituality. Hockey should not be the solitary focus of a person’s life, but its practice can deepen the values needed to be a complete spiritual human being. And that is what we are about here at *Ghost* — to form young men into complete human beings.

Sometimes, just sometimes, the Doctors of the Church can come to life on the cold ice of a hockey rink. ■